DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 226 TM 032 577

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TITLE Accreditation May Be a Necessary Factor in, but Is It Sufficient for, High Teacher Quality? An Examination of the Performance of Teacher Preparation Units on Accreditation and Certification Evaluations.

PUB DATE 2001-04-00

NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Accreditation (Institutions); Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Institutional Evaluation; Licensing Examinations (Professions); *Preservice Teachers; Teacher Certification; *Teacher Education

IDENTIFIERS *Praxis Series; *Quality Assurance

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which two quality assurance mechanisms, accreditation and teacher certification, are consistent in assigning high marks for teacher quality to the same teacher education institutions in Georgia. The study sample was teacher candidates in thirteen institutions in Georgia that sought initial approval/accreditation between 1995 and 1999. Institutions' accreditation reports showing ratings on 20 National Council for the Accreditation of Colleges of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the overall approval/accreditation decision were examined. Praxis II test results were obtained for 2,307 teacher education candidates from the 13 institutions. On a first attempt at Praxis II, teacher candidates from NCATE accredited institutions performed better than students from institutions that were denied NCATE accreditation or that had been awarded conditional accreditation. However, teacher candidates from accredited institutions were not distinguishable from teacher candidates from non-accredited institutions when candidates' best performance was considered. (Contains 3 tables and 11 references.) (SLD)

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# Accreditation may be a necessary factor in, but is it sufficient for, high teacher quality?: An examination of the performance of teacher preparation units on accreditation and certification evaluations

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TM032577

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington, April 2001.

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Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine two mechanisms, accreditation and teacher certification, designed to ensure the production and supply of high quality teachers. According to Darling-Hammond (1998), the accreditation process is "meant to ensure that all preparation programs provide a reasonably common body of knowledge and structured training experiences that are comprehensive and up-to-date." On the other hand, certification or licensing is a way to verify that the teacher candidates have acquired the knowledge they need to teach. Whereas several states and institutions use only one method, others subscribe to both. Moreover, selected institutions, especially the Ivy League institutions, choose not to seek accreditation or the stamp of approval from the National Council for the Accreditation of Colleges of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE is the first and the largest national body that accredits teacher education units and programs. When graduates from state approved or NCATE accredited programs are tested by the states before they can certify them, it implies that the states do not believe that passing teacher education courses is a guarantee that prospective teachers have acquired the knowledge and skills expected from beginning teachers. Many students that are required to obtain a teaching certificate often question why they have to "prove" themselves again through tests even though they are graduating from accredited programs. This additional testing may mean one of two things: First, that the courses or the tests are irrelevant or misaligned to classroom teaching; Second, that the courses lack

appropriate rigor. Critics contend that it is some of both. They argue that teacher education programs and their accreditation agencies are so institutionally based that they have become too divorced from the classroom for which they are preparing teachers (Frazier, 2000). In terms of rigor, the critics claim that teacher education programs, especially Early Childhood and Elementary Education programs, tend to attract the weakest students whose very high grades in teacher preparation programs, they charge, are highly suspect. The latter may explain why Colleges of Education in most Ivy League institutions do not seek NCATE stamp of approval because they consider their own quality control mechanisms and standards more stringent than those of NCATE.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent both quality-assurance mechanisms (accreditation and certification) are consistent in assigning high marks for teacher quality to the same institutions. Specifically, is it reasonable to expect teacher candidates from NCATE accredited units/programs to pass at higher rates on certification tests than their counterparts who graduate from programs that are approved with stipulations or denied approval? What does it mean if an institution's programs are approved and accredited but its graduates have a low pass rate on certification tests? Conversely, what does it mean if an institution has difficulty getting approval even though its graduates easily pass the state's certification tests?

## Perspective/ Theoretical Framework

Teacher quality has been catapulted to center stage in ongoing education reform initiatives and debates. In some areas, teacher quality attained eminence out of the need

to find and blame a scapegoat for the malaise in student achievement or out of misidentification of the problem that the reforms are trying to solve as Ballou and Pordusky (1997) argue. In fact, they go so far as to charge that the focus on teacher preparation, by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF,1996), as the main way to reform education is a deliberate act of turf protection by the education community. They claim that there is no evidence that teachers prepared by teacher preparation programs teach any better than those who possess a liberal arts degree in the content area they teach. Ballou and Pordusky essentially question the necessity of teacher preparation programs. Despite the conflicting evidence on the effect of method of teacher preparation or teacher subject matter knowledge on student performance (Friedman, 2000), there does not seem to be any disagreement on the effect of the teacher on student's learning. Studies such as by Wright et al. (1997) and, and reports such as What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future (NCTAF, 1996) and Standard-Setting in Teaching: Changes in Licensing, Certification, and Assessment (Darling-Hammond, 1998) have lent credence to the role of high teacher quality in the reform of education. Methods for ensuring high quality teacher candidates have centered mainly on the application of high accreditation and/or certification standards. But accreditation is optional and any schools, ranging from Ivy League schools to small, poor and/or private schools of questionable quality, may opt not to seek accreditation. Ivy League schools do not seek NCATE accreditation because they contend that their own quality controls and standards are more stringent than those of NCATE. The small and/or poor schools do not seek accreditation because they know or fear that they will not meet the standards. Even if all institutions become accredited, the Center for Policy Analysis

of the American Council on Education (2000) captures most people's sentiments with regard to the prevailing techniques for ensuring high teacher quality. It maintains that "current mechanisms of academic quality control in colleges and universities, in schools and school systems, and in state laws and regulations fall short of ensuring that only qualified teachers teach" (p.3).

While NCATE processes assure a national flavor to the core of preparation, states' approval processes ensure that local needs are met. Thus, all teacher preparation programs require the approval of a relevant state department or agency to operate. Most states require teacher preparation programs to also be accredited by an education accrediting body such as NCATE. Even where NCATE accreditation is not required, many state approval systems utilize NCATE standards for reviewing and approving teacher preparation programs. This happens because being accredited by or associated with NCATE is considered a mark of distinction, in addition to making state standards of approval processes, and products more easily comparable to other states and more rigorous. This will help erase the poor enforcement, and poor monitoring (Darling-Hammond, 1998) stigma that state approval processes have endured. While critics are questioning the ability of accreditation and certification processes to guarantee quality teachers, studies are emerging to support the same. Based on one such study conducted in Kentucky, Wise (1997) essentially posited a direct link between program accreditation and teacher quality. According to him, new teachers in Kentucky reported to be well-prepared in areas that were covered in the NCATE standards and not well prepared in others that were not part of the NCATE standards. Gitomer, Latham, and Ziomek (1999) propose an even more direct link between NCATE accreditation and performance of

graduates. They report that "passing rates for students attending these [NCATE accredited] institutions are significantly higher [91%] than for students from other institutions [84%] even when students from other institutions have higher mean college admission scores." Studies like this empower NCATE to claim that its stamp of approval ensures the public that "new teacher graduates are ready to help all children learn, that new teacher graduates know their subject matter and the most effective ways to teach it, ..."

Bingham (1998) argues that a way of achieving higher quality teachers is for schools of education to "ensure that after a period of four years, 70% of their graduates can pass the licensing examination given in their state, **or** [emphasis added] become accredited by a nationally recognized agency." This suggests that either accreditation or certification should suffice to guarantee teacher quality. Gitomer et al. (1999), the authors of the widely cited Educational Testing Service (ETS ) study, conclude that the data from their study represent "a first step in addressing NCATE as an accountability mechanism in teacher preparation." Critics are not persuaded that a strong association between accreditation status and certification exams guarantees that only high quality teachers reach the classroom. Rather, such an association causes them to question the validity of selecting teachers based on pencil and paper tests. To address such concerns, ETS is revising and incorporating performance-based evaluations into its certification tests while NCATE shifted to performance-based standards in 2000 and plans to shift to out-put based standards in 2001.

This study was motivated by the observation that some colleges that received the coveted " NCATE Approval" rating were the colleges that perennially have some of the

worst pass rates on Praxis II examinations. On the other hand, some colleges that post some of the highest pass rates were either denied accreditation or approved with stipulations. Praxis II is a set of tests administered by ETS and used to measure the level of content and/or pedagogical content that a prospective teacher candidate has. This study was designed to investigate if the differences in pass rates that were found in a national study among accredited and non-accredited institutions also manifest within a given state where teacher preparation units are subjected to the same local standard. Also germane to this study is how well the accredited institutions performed on the certification tests, not merely whether they did better than institutions that were refused accreditation. These questions will be examined using the accreditation records of teacher preparation institutions in Georgia and the performance of their students on Praxis II certification tests.

## Method

The design of this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The sample comprises teacher candidates in 13 institutions in Georgia that sought initial approval/accreditation between 1995 and 1999. Institutions' accreditation reports showing ratings on 20 NCATE standards and the overall approval/accreditation decision were examined. The decision that a standard was met or unmet was based on site visits, observations and examination of documents and reports by NCATE and Professional Standards Commission's (PSC) boards of examiners (BOE). The final decision regarding accreditation status is made by an Evaluation Review Panel (ERP) set up by the PSC which reviews BOE's evaluations and recommendations as well as rejoinders from institutions being evaluated. Also, the performance of teacher education

candidates on Praxis II certification tests were aggregated by accreditation status. Candidates were considered to have passed if they took and passed all the tests required for a license in their field. Praxis candidates are allowed to retake tests if they failed on their first attempt. Praxis II test results were obtained for candidates who took the tests from July 1997, when they were required for licensing in Georgia, to September 1999. The current study used accreditation data collected and reported in a larger study entitled: The Impact Study on the Application of Standards to Educator Preparation Programs in Georgia (PSC, 2000). The Evaluation Review Panel's final recommendation for each teacher preparation unit is either *Approved, Approved with Stipulations,* or *Denied*. The decision is reached through a process of document review. The final accreditation decision is made by the 18 members of the Professional Standards Commission. Six institutions received approval status, two were approved with stipulation, and five were denied accreditation. A Chi-square test of independence was used to test the relationship, or lack of it, between an institutions' classification on accreditation and the performance of their teacher education candidates on Praxis II tests. Based on the assumptions and claims made for accreditation, it is hypothesized that there is a strong association between performance on NCATE accreditation and performance on Praxis II tests. The hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance.

## Result

Results of 2,307 teacher education candidates, from the 13 institutions, who took Praxis II tests for certification between July 1997 and September 1999 were analyzed in three 2 x 3 contingency tables. A Chi-square test showed a significant relationship between accreditation status and first-attempt performance on Praxis II tests as shown in

Table 1, $\chi^2$ (2, N = 2244) = 12.55, $p < .05$.

Insert Table 1 about here

There was no relationship, however, between accreditation status and performance on Praxis II when the candidates' best performance is used. as seen in Table 2, $\chi^2$ (2, N = 2307) = 1.29, $p > .05$ .

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 shows the pass rates for the three NCATE groups on the first and best attempts. The table shows that on the first attempt, approved institutions passed at the highest rates (74.2%) followed by the Approved with Stipulation (70.0%), with the institutions denied accreditation posting the lowest pass rates (67.7%). No pattern was evident in pass rates based on best effort.

Insert Table 3 about here

A Friedman test for two-way analysis of variance by ranks showed no relationship between accreditation status and performance basis, $\chi_r^2$ (1, n = 3, k = 2) = 3.0, $p > .05$.

## Discussion and Conclusion

On a first attempt on Praxis II, teacher candidates from NCATE-accredited institutions perform better than students from institutions that were denied NCATE accreditation or institutions that were awarded conditional accreditation. However, teacher candidates from accredited institutions are not distinguishable from teacher

candidates from non-accredited institutions when candidates' best performance is considered. Only the first attempt results support Gitomer et al.'s national study. ETS determines performance based on the most recent score, which will yield a similar interpretation as first attempt if a candidate's most recent score is still a failing grade and similar to best result if the most recent score is a passing grade. Nevertheless, one wonders why candidates from accredited and non-accredited institutions do not differ on best results but differ on first attempt performance? One possible explanation is that subsequent performances would give rise to a ceiling effect because with enough practice, coaching and multiple trials, most candidates would eventually pass their Praxis II tests. Thus, differences in candidates' first attempt may better reflect differences in program quality than results based on subsequent and/or multiple attempts. Given that the passing rate, even in accredited institutions, is not 100%, and given that certification is not based on institutional performance, it appears that using accreditation and certification in a multiple cut-off, rather than compensatory, model would better ensure the preparation and selection of high quality teachers.

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Table 1

Performance on First Attempt on Praxis II and Accreditation Status

| | NCATE Status | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Performance On Praxis II | Approved | Approved With Stipulation | Denied | Total |
| # of Passes | 1179 | 32 | 406 | 1617 |
| # of Failures | 410 | 14 | 203 | 627 |
| Total | 1589 | 46 | 609 | 2244 |

Table 2
Performance on Best Effort on Praxis II and Accreditation Status

| | NCATE Status | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Performance On Praxis II | Approved | Approved With Stipulation | Denied | Total |
| # of Passes | 1385 | 41 | 509 | 1935 |
| # of Failures | 277 | 7 | 88 | 327 |
| Total | 1662 | 48 | 597 | 2307 |

Table 3

Praxis II Pass Rates on the First and Best Attempts Within Accreditation Status

| | NCATE Status | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Performance Basis | Approved % | Approved With Stipulation % | Denied % | Overall % |
| First Attempt | 74.2 | 70.0 | 67.7 | 72.1 |
| Best Attempt | 83.3 | 85.4 | 85.3 | 83.9 |